Professor Elijah (Lucien) Polak - A tribute

By Jean Walrand

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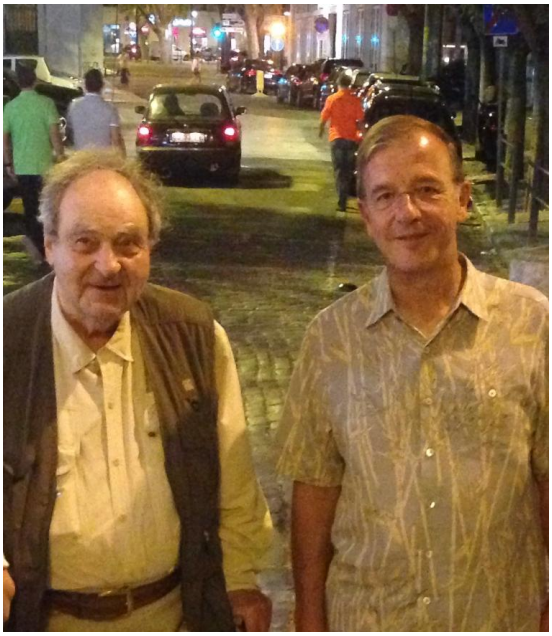
Circa 1996

I took my first course from Lucien in 1975 and enjoyed it so much that I signed up for two more. Although his office was next to mine in Cory Hall, our professional paths barely crossed for over thirty years. About fifteen years ago, after Lucien had retired, he'd wander into my office, looking for someone to talk to. At the time, I was exploring a problem with a student, and we brought Lucien in—partly to short-circuit his monologues about Ubuntu and why graphical interfaces were a waste of pixels.

We ended up writing a paper on dynamic games and took it to Lisbon in 2014.[1] He was 83. The trip gave him a real boost—he caught up with old colleagues, got a kick out of being back in the game, and brought his wife Ginette along. We turned it into a holiday, and I think it wound up being his last professional trip.

After that, we fell into a routine of meeting for coffee or tea. Early on, we'd go to Nefeli's or Brewed Awakening, where he'd inevitably talk himself into a cookie while explaining his set-point theory of weight (which, conveniently, always made room for one more). Later, when his mobility faded, we moved to his house. But Lucien making coffee or tea was never simple—he'd researched water temperature, grind settings, frothers, beans, storage methods, even matcha grades. It was less a beverage and more a minor engineering project.

Over those cups, I discovered things I hadn't expected. He was sentimental, read contemporary French novels with real appetite, and could recount plots and characters in surprising detail. He devoured foreign films and series, and would admit to staying up too late to finish them. He also cooked with enthusiasm, and we'd debate fish preparation—sous vide, cast iron, or even the microwave with a special Spanish container. He once noted that ChatGPT gave surprisingly good salmon-timing advice—useful and faintly absurd.



Lucien and I in Lisbon, Portugal, 2014

[1] For the details of this paper, see Vu-Quoc, Loc, *Professor Elijah (Lucien) Polak - Publications*, Internet Archive. CC BY-SA 4.0.

He often grew nostalgic about former students and colleagues, and recalled working with Karl Pister to get NSF to fund a VAX for the department. Sometimes, though, the conversation turned darker—Lucien would admit his fear of a painful end. He'd compare religious views of the afterlife, then conclude it would be exactly like the before-life—which, he'd say, was quite reassuring. Before you die, you're alive; after, you're not there—so why fear it?

Nefeli Cafe

Brewed Awakening, April 8, 2022 - archived 26.8.4

I treasure the memory of those special moments with Lucien, and I miss him more than I can say.

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Biography: Professor Jean Walrand

He received his Ph.D. in EECS from UC Berkeley. He is the co-author of "Communication Networks: A Concise Introduction" (Morgan-Claypool 2010), "Scheduling and Congestion Control for Communication and Processing Networks" (Morgan-Claypool, 2010), "High-Performance Communication Networks" (2nd ed, Morgan Kaufman, 2000) and "Sharing Network Resources (Morgan-Claypool, 2014), and the author of An Introduction to Queueing Networks (Prentice Hall, 1988) and Probability in Electrical Engineering and Computer Science (Amazon, 2014). Prof. Walrand is a Fellow of the Belgian American Education Foundation and of the IEEE and a recipient of the INFORMS Lanchester Prize, the IEEE Stephen O. Rice Prize, the 2012 IEEE Koji Kobayashi Award and the 2013 ACM Sigmetrics Achievement Award.

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